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American IFOR experience: Psychological stressors in the early deployment period

Paul T. Bartone, Ph.D.
US Army Medical Research Unit-Europe
Walter Reed Army Institute of Research

ABSTRACT

The American military has deployed about 20,000 troops for the international peacekeeping force known as IFOR (Implementation Force) in the former Yugoslavia. How well military personnel adapt to the psychological stressors of operations like this is of critical importance to mission success and to individual health and well-being. Yet, the US has little experience with such operations. It is necessary to develop a good understanding of the nature of operational stressors at various phases of peacekeeping missions in order to plan effective programs for preventing ill-effects of stress, and maintaining morale and mental health of troops and families. The U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Germany (Heidelberg) is examining the nature and effects of psychological stressors on American forces over time. Highest stressors just prior to deployment reflect concerns about family welfare and safety, time to make needed preparations, and loss of educational and job advancement opportunities. In the early deployment phase, major stressors are crowded and austere living conditions, harsh weather, high workload, mission uncertainty and concern for families. Three-months into the operation, boredom, being away from home and family, and restrictions on movement and behavior emerge as major issues. For many troops, an intra-psychic conflict develops around the perceived imbalance between personal sacrifices required by the mission (loss of family, freedoms, career development), and the importance of the overall mission and one's role in it. The relative dearth of meaningful professional daily work activities causes some to question the value of their investment, and leads to increased anger, frustration, guilt and depression. This may be a key psychological issue in operations of this sort that needs to be addressed by planners and leaders. Additional early findings and recommendations will be provided in the full report.

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Note: The views of the author do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense (para 4-3, AR 360-5). Thomas W. Britt, Ph.D. and Amy B. Adler, Ph.D. are co-investigators on the USAMRU-E Bosnia soldier research project. CPT Steve Lewis is Commander of the 254th Combat Stress Control Detachment.

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American IFOR experience: Psychological stressors in the early deployment period

Paul T. Bartone, Ph.D.

Peacekeeping/contingency missions like the current one in Bosnia present unusual social-psychological challenges and operational stressors for participating soldiers. The American military has deployed about 20,000 troops for the international peacekeeping force known as IFOR (Implementation Force) in the former Yugoslavia. How well military personnel adapt to the psychological stressors of operations like this is of critical importance to mission success and to individual health and well-being. While some of the stressors are familiar ones (e.g., family separation), there are likely to be new and unexpected stressors associated with peacekeeping missions like that in Bosnia, with which the US Army has little historical experience. In order to plan effective programs for preventing ill-effects of stress, and maintaining morale and mental health of troops and families, it is first necessary to develop a good understanding of the nature of operational stressors at various phases of peacekeeping missions

The US Army Medical Research Unit-Europe (USAMRU-E), a field unit of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, conducts studies of stress and health among American soldiers who are stationed in Europe, and who deploy for "out-of-sector" peacekeeping and contingency operations. For the IFOR mission, USAMRU-E investigators developed a short survey instrument to assess stress, health, and morale starting in the pre-deployment period. Just over 3,000 soldiers completed this survey prior to deploying. Surveys were distributed at marshaling sites during periods when soldiers had excess time, usually awaiting processing or transportation. A mid-deployment survey is planned for June 1996, in collaboration with military researchers from the Army Research Institute and Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Washington.

The top ten stressors in the pre-deployment period are listed below, as represented by percent of respondents (N=3,036) indicating medium to very high level of trouble or concern with the issue.

- (1) Completing personal business before deploying (63%)
- (2) Loss of educational opportunities (60%)
- (3) Preparing my family for my deployment (59%)
- (4) Being separated from family & friends in States (57%)
- (5) Concern Rear Detachment will care for family (49%)
- (6) Lack of job advancement opportunities (46%)
- (7) Financial problems (43%)
- (8) Problems with unit leaders (42%)
- (9) Problems getting needed services from Army (40%)
- (10) Family duties and responsibilities (40%)

The author had the opportunity to deploy as a psychologist with a new Army "Combat Stress Control" unit, and did so for the first 3-4 months of the Bosnia mission (DEC-MAR 96). Army Combat Stress units are in a good position to develop information about the nature and extent of psychological stressors, since an important part of their mission is to identify the "stress threats" that must be addressed with prevention measures. US military leaders increasingly recognize that psychological stress in military operations can increase the risk of death and serious injury from accidents, inattentiveness and errors of judgement, exposure (cold injuries), friendly-fire incidents, and suicide. Psychological stress can also increase the risk of soldier misconduct, alcohol abuse, and violations of the rules of engagement.

Over the first three months of the deployment, extensive observations and interviews with soldiers were performed, aimed primarily at identifying the nature of deployment-related stressors, and soldier and leader responses to stress. Information was collected primarily from American soldiers in Croatia, but also included Hungary (Taszar, Kaposvar) and Bosnia (Lukavec, Tuzla) locations. Over 100 soldiers were interviewed individually, and another 174 in a class/group setting. Extensive consultations (196) with leaders were also done. Based on these observations, interviews and consultations, the primary stressors were identified at approximately monthly intervals. These are presented below.

EARLY DEPLOYMENT STRESSORS 1: First month

The early deployment period (DEC-JAN) was one of intense activity and long work hours associated with the primary mission requirement of quickly moving vast numbers of personnel and equipment into areas designated in the Dayton Accords, and establishing the Zones of Separation between the warring factions according to the specified dates. In general, American soldiers performed this mission with high professionalism and energy, and it can now be said that the deployment phase itself was accomplished successfully and safely. Nevertheless, it was a highly stressful period. Principal stressors for soldiers included having to leave their families just before the Christmas holiday, isolation and little contact with home once deployed, high work tempo and long hours, fatigue and lack of sleep/rest time, and crowded and Spartan living conditions, all exacerbated by some of the harshest winter weather the area has experienced in many years.

- (1) Heavy workload, long hours
- (2) Crowded and confined living quarters
- (3) Poor sanitation of latrines and living areas
- (4) Cold, harsh weather
- (5) Frequent & lengthy meetings/briefings
- (6) Family separation
- (7) Isolation (more acute for attached soldiers)
- (8) Mission ambiguity and uncertainty
- (9) Poor communication, flow of information
- (10) "Micro-management" of junior leaders
- (11) Sleep loss
- (12) Lack of physical exercise
- (13) Little recognition

EARLY DEPLOYMENT STRESSORS 2: Second Month

As the operation moved into month 2 (JAN-FEB) and living conditions began to improve, some of the very early stressors diminished and new ones surfaced. American units working on bridging operations in Croatia provide a good example. The weather was starting to improve, with fewer winter storms and extreme low temperatures. Work schedules and tempos became more regular and predictable, and more rest/sleep time was available. Living conditions at the base camps improved with the gradual provision of warm, dry living areas, hot showers, laundry and mess facilities, exchange stores, and chapel services. In addition, a growing number of American military camps were receiving special English language television and radio broadcasts, and fresh food rations were occasionally available. The primary stress factors identified during this period are listed below:

- (1) Isolation.
- (2) Uncertainty and confusion about the mission
- (3) Lack of Recognition.
- (4) Workload.
- (5) Monotony, boredom.
- (6) Lack of recreation/entertainment
- (7) Lack of privacy.
- (8) Doubts about mission importance.

EARLY DEPLOYMENT STRESSORS: Third Month

In the third month of the deployment (FEB-MAR) morale continued to improve somewhat as a function of steady improvements in quality of life, and increased predictability in work schedules. Morale among units still in transit was generally somewhat lower, mainly due to continuing uncertainty regarding where and when they are moving, and ambiguities about the mission. Morale also appeared to vary somewhat according to location; some units were in more isolated locations with generally less comfortable living conditions and fewer amenities and services. The principal stress factors identified during this observation period are listed below, along with some recommended countermeasures based on past experience and investigations (eg., Bartone, Adler & Vaitkus, 1996).

(1) Uncertainty. The major stressor for soldiers (and many leaders too) concerns uncertainty and confusion about the mission, where and when the unit might be moving next, and command policies. Unplanned unit moves are especially stressful and disturbing for soldiers. Effective countermeasures all relate to improving the flow and accuracy of information to soldiers, and minimizing changes and policy shifts. Newsletters, bulletin and message boards, radio and television messages (AFN), leader briefings ("Commander Calls"), and leaders talking informally to soldiers all serve to reduce uncertainty.

(2) Lack of Recognition. Soldiers have a strong desire for recognition as professionals who are contributing to an important mission. Leaders can provide recognition in a variety of ways including awards, special events, and a simple praise or a "pat on the back". Leaders should remind soldiers of how their daily work activities contribute to the overall success of the Bosnia mission. Media recognition also is a powerful countermeasure to this source of stress. A modern challenge for military leaders is to make positive use of the broadcast media to enhance soldiers' sense of public recognition and mission importance.

(3) Isolation. American troops deployed for IFOR are far away from home and family, living in what is for most a foreign, bleak environment. Many worry about the welfare of their families while they are away. Some soldiers describe weak or non-existent Rear Detachment and Family Support units. During this period, soldiers report increased frustration in placing telephone ("morale") calls through the military telephone network. Countermeasures to isolation stress include improved mail and phone access, newsletters, and active family support and rear detachment activities. A leave - R&R (Rest and Recuperation) program that permits soldiers some time with their families is important, especially given the length of the rotation (one year for most). Strong unit cohesion, friends in the unit, and concerned leadership also are powerful antidotes to social isolation and family separation stress.

(4) Mission importance. Many soldiers expressed doubts about the importance of the mission and the significance of their part in it. Soldiers need to be reminded by leaders of why this is an important mission worth the sacrifices being asked of them.

(5) Workload and "Operations Tempo" (OPTEMPO). In this period many units continued with long work days and 7 day weeks. The fast OPTEMPO actually began prior to the deployment in most units, with soldiers already sleep deprived before leaving home station. Countermeasures would include slowing the tempo, and shifting to a 6-day work week wherever possible. A leave - R&R program would also help by providing soldiers with rest and a change of venue.

(6) Limited recreation opportunities (Morale, Welfare & Recreation - MWR). The Hungary/Croatia/Bosnia environment offers little opportunity for aerobic exercise, which can be an important way to "blow off steam" as well as stay fit for many troops. Concerns about security have led to widespread travel and movement restrictions, with most American troops confined to their base camps. Stationary exercise equipment like bike and rowing machines can provide aerobic exercise without compromising security. Also, time-off from work is more restorative if soldiers have interesting and useful resources to engage them during their time off, such as a gym or weight-lifting room, movie theater, library, etc.

(7) Lack of privacy. Living and working with the same people in close and crowded conditions often leads to increased irritability over time. Everyone needs some privacy, or time alone. Living quarters can be configured to provide some privacy barriers. Also, some private areas for telephone "morale" calls would be valuable.

(8) Monotony, boredom. By the time the mission enters its third month, daily activities start to become routine, boring, and dull for many units. This can lead to complacency, loss of mission focus, and depression. Countermeasures include varying the schedule on weekends, and building special events into the calendar, such as holiday celebrations or parties. Many American forces were able to watch the "Super Bowl" football match in January, which was a positive morale booster. Holiday unit picnics and barbecues give soldiers something to look forward to. Variety in food and menus (including fresh "A" rations) also help. Additional countermeasures include permitting some group travel or cultural visits to local attractions when security permits, and allowing soldiers to wear civilian attire when off-duty and in protected areas.

DISCUSSION

This brief report has focused on identifying the major stress factors for American forces in the early period of their deployment for IFOR. Among the various stressors described is one that is somewhat hidden. It can perhaps best be described as an intra-psychic conflict or dissonance, a "mis-match" between the personal sacrifices and discomforts that being deployed on such missions entails, and the limited perceived pay-off or benefit. Many soldiers perceive the benefit of the mission as minimal; a common belief is that the peace established by IFOR under the Dayton Accords will not be a lasting one. Soldiers also typically see little of value coming to them personally from this deployment. Their jobs are often boring and lacking in meaning, the extra pay they receive is modest, and recognition is often lacking. This situation leads to an intra-psychic conflict that may be psychologically very damaging. At a minimum, deployed soldiers must tolerate an extended and emotionally painful separation from loved ones. When this sacrifice cannot be offset by meaningful daily work activities and an associated belief in the importance of the mission, increasing frustration, bitterness and depression can result.

In partial support of this hypothesis, anger and depression were found to be the most common problems among soldiers presenting to the Combat Stress Control service in Croatia during the early deployment period (Bartone, 1996). In a majority of cases, there were profound worries about the welfare of spouse and family members at home, coupled with a sense in the soldier that his/her presence on this mission was insignificant. Anecdotally, similar issues were apparent with many soldiers interviewed informally, along with feelings of guilt over leaving their families. Additional research is needed to identify the prevalence and significance of this intra-psychic stressor. If it is determined to be a significant problem, there are important policy implications. For example, simply providing more and better recreation opportunities will probably not do much to ameliorate the conflict, and could even intensify it by increasing guilt (i.e., feelings of guilt about enjoying oneself while one's family is left unprotected and vulnerable). Instead, policy efforts will need to focus on improving benefits to families, and increasing the soldier's identity with and belief in the mission, and the importance of his/her role in it.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a preliminary account of sources of stress for American IFOR forces through the early (first 3 months) period of the operation. A clear understanding of sources of psychological stress at various phases in peacekeeping operations is necessary in order to counter these stressors effectively. Armed with such knowledge, military leaders and support personnel can identify early potential morale and mental health problems, and take corrective action. In this endeavor, field studies of troops are essential. Multi-method and naturalistic studies are the only available mechanism for gathering data on the actual stressors of deployments, as well as soldier responses. And by understanding the psychological stressors of operations like the IFOR mission in Bosnia, military organizations can optimize doctrine and policies for maintaining soldier psychological fitness and resiliency in future operations.

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OVERVIEW OF USAMRU-E BOSNIA RESEARCH

- ▶ CONDUCT PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH FOR USAREUR SOLDIERS BEFORE, DURING & AFTER BOSNIA OPERATION
- ▶ IDENTIFY NATURE & SOURCES OF STRESS AT VARIOUS PHASES
- ▶ ASSESS TROOP HEALTH, MORALE, PERFORMANCE OVER TIME
- ▶ USE SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OBSERVATIONS
- ▶ CONDUCTED AS PART OF COMBAT STRESS CONTROL MISSION
- ▶ PROVIDE LESSONS LEARNED TO IMPROVE TRAINING & DOCTRINE
- ▶ PROVIDE SHORT-TERM FEEDBACK TO LEADERS:
 - STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT, & MORALE & HEALTH
- ▶ LARGE SAMPLE, 25-50% OF DEPLOYED FORCE, ALL UNIT TYPES
- ▶ APPROXIMATELY 3,000 PRE-DEPLOYMENT SURVEYS TO DATE
- ▶ CONDUCT SIMILAR STUDY OF SPOUSES

STRESSORS FOR US IFOR SOLDIERS: PRE-DEPLOYMENT

- | | |
|---|--------|
| (1) Completing personal business before deploying | (63%*) |
| (2) Loss of educational opportunities | (60%) |
| (3) Preparing my family for my deployment | (59%) |
| (4) Being separated from family & friends in States | (57%) |
| (5) Concern Rear Detachment will care for family | (49%) |
| (6) Lack of job advancement opportunities | (46%) |
| (7) Financial problems | (43%) |
| (8) Problems with unit leaders | (42%) |
| (9) Problems getting needed services from Army | (40%) |
| (10) Family duties and responsibilities | (40%) |

*Percent of respondents (N=3,036) indicating medium, high, or very high level of concern with issue, pre-deployment soldier survey (N=3,036)

STRESSORS FOR US IFOR SOLDIERS: MONTH 1 (DEC95-JAN96)

- ▶ CROWDED, CONFINED LIVING CONDITIONS
- ▶ POOR SANITATION
- ▶ HARSH WEATHER
- ▶ HIGH WORKLOAD, NO TIME OFF
- ▶ TOO MANY MEETINGS
- ▶ FAMILY SEPARATION - ISOLATION
- ▶ MISSION AMBIGUITY & UNCERTAINTY
- ▶ POOR COMMUNICATION FLOW, "RUMORS"
- ▶ MICRO-MANAGEMENT BY SENIOR LEADERS
- ▶ LACK OF SLEEP
- ▶ LIMITED PHYSICAL EXERCISE

STRESSORS FOR US IFOR SOLDIERS: MONTH 2 (JAN-FEB 96)

- ▶ ISOLATION - FAR FROM HOME & FAMILY
- ▶ UNCERTAINTY & CONFUSION ABOUT MISSION
- ▶ LACK OF RECOGNITION AS PROFESSIONALS
- ▶ LONG WORK DAYS, NO "WEEK-END" (GROUNDHOG DAY)
- ▶ BOREDOM - MONOTONY (GROUNDHOG DAY)
- ▶ POOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES (MWR)
- ▶ NEED FOR PRIVACY
- ▶ DOUBTS ABOUT IMPORTANCE OF MISSION

STRESSORS FOR US IFOR SOLDIERS: MONTH 3 (FEB-MAR 96)

- ▶ **UNCERTAINTY & CONFUSION ABOUT MISSION**
- ▶ **LACK OF RECOGNITION AS PROFESSIONALS**
- ▶ **ISOLATION - FAR FROM HOME & FAMILY**
- ▶ **DOUBTS ABOUT IMPORTANCE OF MISSION**
- ▶ **LONG WORK DAYS, NO "WEEK-END"**
- ▶ **POOR RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES (MWR)**
- ▶ **LACK OF PRIVACY**
- ▶ **BOREDOM - MONOTONY; TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS**